Social Determinants Accelerator Act Lessons from the Performance Partnership Pilots

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Social Determinants Accelerator Act: Lessons from the Performance Partnership Pilots

Despite widespread dysfunction in our nation's capital, certain "good government" interests still resonate across the aisle and across branches of government, such as pushing past red tape, emphasizing results, and coordinating across narrow policy silos. These are easy talking points, but how do they translate into policy?

Two examples are the newly proposed Social Determinants Accelerator Act of 2019 (SDA Act) and the Performance Partnership Pilots for Disconnected Youth (P3) authority established in 2014. Both efforts focus on helping the states, tribes, and localities that implement many federal social programs to overcome fragmented requirements and processes across these different programs, which can stand in the way of individuals benefiting and thriving as intended. For example, a homeless youth at risk of dropping out of school may need services related to health, housing, education, workforce, and transportation. If these systems lack a coherent way to work together, then services may not reach the young person, may discourage her from getting help, or may interfere with one another in unintended ways. The SDA Act and P3 offer states, tribes, and localities a mechanism to rethink how complementary programs, which are often operated by different agencies, can fit together to support the individuals and families that they collectively serve.

These efforts are important and compelling—and, as the past five years of P3 implementation demonstrate, take tremendous coordination to work effectively. A bipartisan group of legislators backs the SDA Act in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.ⁱ These legislators have a chance to build on the experiences and insights gained through P3. This piece will summarize P3, reflect on lessons learned so far from its initial evaluation and from the Forum's role in implementation, and highlight ways the SDA Act can better support good governance.

What is P3, and why is it needed?

The federal government invests a large amount of money to support youth through a variety of federal agencies, which make grants to state, local, and tribal agencies as well as non-profits. These other levels of government, in turn, use these federal funds in concert with other funding streams to provide programs that often serve similar or overlapping populations in different ways. While a local community may want to create a continuum of opportunities that can meet the multifaceted needs of young people, coordinating an array of grants with different reporting requirements, duration, and regulations can be a herculean task.

From separate application forms and processes to varying performance measures and reporting systems, the management burden on agencies – as well as the onus on youth and families to understand and utilize an array of services – can exact a significant toll. Each grant's unique requirements, while well-intentioned, can make it extremely difficult to meet a community's overarching goal: helping youth reach better outcomes. For example, the graphic labeled Figure 1 below, which was constructed in 2002 to examine how programs in Los Angeles County could interact with just one family, conveys a sense of how complex program coordination can become.

FIGURE 1.ⁱⁱ



P3 was created as an alternative way of doing business. Participating states, tribes, and localities—along with nonprofit partners—would commit to an integrated set of education, employment, and other outcomes for a specific youth population. Federal agencies would agree to a unified set of rules and requirements to govern eligible funding streams used to fund services for that population. Federal agencies would benefit from clearer and well measured outcomes, and states, tribes, and local governments would benefit from streamlined requirements that did not conflict with each other. A basic way of framing P3 is, "What flexibility do communities need to make the existing 'whole' of federal resources supporting youth greater than the sum of its parts?"

In 2014 Congress authorized up to 10 pilots using discretionary funds from the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education as well as the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Congress would later expand P3 to include the Departments of Justice and Housing and Urban Development. Congress has renewed the pilot authority each year, and agencies have implemented four rounds of cohorts, which can be viewed at <u>youth.gov.</u>ⁱⁱⁱ Importantly, P3 emerged from a time of economic distress and federal budgetary constraint. As a result, the authority deliberately emphasizes effective use of existing resources without new appropriations.

What are lessons for the federal government from P3 evaluations?

The first five years of P3 offer valuable insights into what it takes to transform long-standing ways of funding, governing, and implementing federal programs.^{iv v} Importantly, these insights come from a combination of third-party evaluations and assessments as well as personal perspective from those involved in implementation.

Several third-party assessments crystallize how P3 produced collaborations at federal and other levels of government that used leading practices for effectiveness—and how these collaborations faced challenges due to the lack of important supports like resources, technical assistance information, and infrastructure such as for data sharing.

A 2017 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found both strengths and weaknesses in implementation.^{vi} While agencies had utilized leading practices for interagency collaboration and pilot design, they had not fully identified necessary funding and staff resources to sustain the pilots or determined criteria about whether, how, and when to implement P3 flexibilities in a broader context.^{vii}

The report, based on a review of agency documents and interviews with representatives from federal and local agencies, found that the complex and new nature of the multiple-partner pilots had delayed pilot design and implementation. These delays occurred both for negotiating and authorizing the partnership as well as goal setting. In addition to the pilot sites, lengthy and complex processes at the federal level also contributed significantly to delays.

Additionally, the flexibilities from P3 were more often used to tailor services to the specific needs of pilot target populations than to reduce administrative burden.^{viii}

What was the Forum's role in P3?

The Forum's role dates back to 2011 when President Obama issued an executive order on administrative flexibility that charged federal agencies with aligning administrative and regulatory requirements to help lower unnecessary costs and enable better results for states, tribes, and localities. The Forum brought together state children's cabinet directors—who often spearhead state-level efforts to coordinate policy and programming to best support outcomes for children and youth—to share their efforts with White House staff. As part of this collaboration, the Forum published recommendations to remove barriers affecting localities trying to improve child and youth outcomes through interagency efforts.

When P3 was proposed to Congress in President Obama's 2012 budget, the Forum began lining up bipartisan support, which eventually led to successful enactment in 2014 appropriations. In the meantime, the Forum helped to pave the way for implementation by convening two counties, four states, and federal agencies to identify policy barriers impeding effective service to youth.

Since enactment, the Forum has assisted localities in applying for P3 and supported multiple pilot cohorts as they began their work to align federal funding and remove potential administrative or regulatory burdens. Some of this technical assistance was provided jointly with partner organizations, including Jobs for the Future, Performance Excellence Partners, and Mathematica.

The report recommended that the Director of OMB should coordinate with federal agencies to "identify and estimate expected annual financial and staff resource contributions from each agency [needed to sustain pilots]," "identify criteria or standards for assessing scalability," of pilots and "collect data needed to address those criteria or standards." ^{ix}

An IBM Business of Government report similarly reviewed agency documents and guidance and also conducted interviews with a majority of the first cohort of pilots.x The report noted that while most pilots used best practices for creating interagency collaborations (such as a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support), the pilots were still not utilizing the flexibility granted by the pilots to the greatest effect in terms of size and scope. For example, "most pilots have no more than two approved waivers, involving what appear to be minor changes in program eligibility or reporting requirements. Only four of the nine pilots have been granted authority to blend federal funds."^{xi}

The report noted that data systems were not funded adequately to work across policy silos and the formal evaluation of the pilots was not designed to draw conclusions about the P3 structure itself. And, echoing the GAO report, sustainability remains a concern both because of low initial startup funding for pilots and lack of certainty around support for pilots after they utilize initial funding. The report recommended that federal agencies support a more aggressive use of P3's waiver authority, that Congress extend the time allowed for P3 projects, that evidence and evaluation requirements for P3 should be strengthened, and that P3 should be better aligned with other collaborative and evidence-based initiatives.^{xiii}

Mathematica, who was contracted by the U.S. Department of Labor as part of the overall evaluation of the P3 effort, recently released an evaluation focusing on the early experiences of the first cohort of pilots.^{xiv} The implementation study largely includes data from interviews conducted with pilot administrators, staff and partners in 2017. This study led to four key findings.

First, pilots that were starting to make system changes were led by state or local agencies that frequently convened and coordinated with local youth-serving organization and brought together partners from across different program areas. Second, pilots brought together a diverse set of government and community partners who were willing to work across their different program areas to coordinate their youth-related services. These findings demonstrate the importance of establishing incentives and enabling conditions for partners to collaborate across systems.

Echoing the GAO and IBM reports, not all of the pilots' leaders and their partners had a full understanding of the available flexibilities. Further understanding was needed to pull together existing funding streams and remove other programmatic barriers. Finally, as found by the IBM report, although some pilots proposed the creation of shared data systems, none accomplished this goal in their first year due to logistical and privacy concerns. Two of these five chose not to pursue this work.^{xv}

What are insights from the frontlines of implementing P3?

The Forum's involvement with individuals and organizations implementing P3 has yielded additional insights. A major theme is the capacity required to enact new ways of doing business, including staff, financial resources, and shared decision-making. For example:

- Within individual federal agencies, P3 required intensive involvement from a range of staff with expertise in programs, appropriations law, authorizing statutes, financial management, and operations, particularly during early cohorts. In order to meet this significant demand, agencies need an internal mandate from senior leadership to make P3 a priority.
- Across federal agencies, P3 required new levels—and sometimes new speed—of joint decision making including timely clearance of P3 grant solicitations, answering questions from prospective applicants, and decisions on applicants' waiver requests. In order to effectively deliver on P3's promise of responsiveness, senior leaders need an efficient mechanism or "shortcut" to finalize decisions across agencies, rather than stack each agency clearance process on top of each other.
- For pilot sites, implementation generally required a dedicated coordinator as well as changes to infrastructure, such as data sharing agreements, processes, or systems. While P3 was conceived as not providing new dollars to sites, this expectation was not necessarily realistic. The \$700,000 start-up grants that agencies offered to the first cohort —grants that agencies pulled from their existing appropriations and that later declined before disappearing—were a rapid response to feedback from the field that some new resources were critical for implementation. This feedback shines light on assumptions baked into P3 that may not be realistic and may hamper progress.

- Across federal agencies and pilot sites or applicants, straightforward communication about federal rules, requirements, and flexibility was a key ingredient for success. In many cases, federal agency clearance processes and restrictions on communicating with prospective grantees during a grant competition complicated this communication. Moreover, difficulties in clarifying information across federal and pilot site staff meant that pilots needed more planning time during start-up periods. To support clear and consistent communication, agencies could better utilize regional staff who often have stronger relationships with states, localities, and tribes and are often the first point of contact when they have questions. Among the first cohort, one of the most valued supports was an "office hours" event at a convening of pilot sites where participants could ask questions and receive on-the-spot technical assistance from federal staff. Creating an unfettered opportunity in which federal staff had clear authority to provide technical assistance in an open and transparent manner is important for optimizing pilot potential and speeding up implementation.
- Using annual appropriations as the vehicle to enact P3 presents inherent limitations. Agencies and applicants alike face a severe time crunch to complete their respective parts of the pilot selection process. This continuous time crunch makes it difficult to implement P3 in a more thoughtful, optimal way. Moreover, waivers that are only possible using P3 authority become very uncertain year to year, especially given consistent use of continuing budget resolutions that last for only weeks at a time. Agencies and pilots alike cannot rely on whether pilots—which are contemplated as lasting for up to five years—can be implemented as planned over time.

What is the Social Determinants Accelerator Act?

Instead of targeting disconnected youth as P3 did, the SDA Act focuses on the social determinants of health. Social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. They include factors like socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood and physical environment, employment, and social support networks, as well as access to health care. ^{xvi}

The proposed legislation focuses on providing flexibility in Medicaid where states and localities are looking to lower unnecessary healthcare costs while improving outcomes. As Congresswomen Cheri Bustos (D-IL), one of the sponsors of the legislation, notes, "one of the greatest challenges to high-impact interventions is the difficulty in navigating and coordinating fragmented and complex programs aimed at addressing healthcare needs, food insecurity, housing instability, and transportation reliability, among others." ^{xvii}

The SDA Act helps states and localities devise strategies for leveraging existing programs to improve health outcomes for those participating in Medicaid. State, local, and tribal governments would have the opportunity to apply for planning grants and technical assistance to create "evidence-based approaches to coordinate services and improve outcomes and cost-effectiveness." xviii The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services would distribute up to \$25 million (as introduced in the House of Representatives) or \$20 million (as introduced in the Senate) for these grants. Localities would need to develop 'Social Determinants Accelerator Plans' that target a group of high-need Medicaid patients, identify key outcomes to be achieved through improved coordination, describe their intended use of evidence-based programs and practices, and include strategies for linking data across programs to measure impact. Importantly, 20 percent of grant funding is set aside for rural communities. ^{xix}

The Secretary of Health and Human Services would also convene a new interagency technical advisory council on social determinants of health. The council, with representatives from federal, state and local government as well as private and nonprofit partners, would provide technical assistance to the chosen grantees by "identifying federal authorities, opportunities and strategies for braiding and blending funds and designing rigorous evaluations." ^{xx} The council would also be responsible for disseminating best practices to the field at large. Up to \$5 million of the total funding for grants can be used to support council activities. ^{xxi}

How does the SDA Act respond to the lessons of P3?

The SDA legislation is distinct from and builds upon P3 in a number of ways:



The SDA Act provides **significant funding for states**, **tribes**, **and localities to plan**. Unlike P3, which did not provide new appropriations for grants, the SDA Act recognizes and embraces the importance of careful and collaborative planning. The legislation sets up a more iterative process that emphasizes both planning and communication across the levels of government. Grantees will need to develop Social Determinants Accelerator Plans by convening relevant stakeholders (both government and external), identifying key high-need Medicaid populations, engaging researchers to develop evaluation designs, and collaborating with federal partners. This process sets up clear mechanisms that allow grantees to develop evidence-based plans and provide them with the opportunity to coordinate with partners at all levels of government.^{xxii} All three of the evaluation reports of P3 highlighted the need for better planning as it relates to the use of data, sustaining partnerships, and participating in evaluation efforts.

The SDA Act **mandates a federal interagency council to act as a centralized support system** to provide grantees with both guidance and technical assistance. Importantly, this statutorily required council has a clear obligation, priority, and resources to help implement the SDA Act. Moreover, the legislation explains which federal and non-federal stakeholders should be members of the council, which is similar to recommendations in the 2017 GAO report that OMB better coordinate efforts to maintain and scale interagency partnerships.

The SDA Act **includes potential representation of non-federal entities on interagency council.** The inclusion of non-federal stakeholders, though optional and at the discretion of the head of GAO, would bring important perspective to federal considerations and decisions. This inclusion would facilitate more open and direct communication across levels of government and even sectors about the realities, requirements, and opportunities that respective stakeholders face. This communication should help to strengthen implementation approaches and processes while setting realistic expectations across stakeholder groups about their respective capacities and abilities to implement the Act.

Unlike P3, the SDA Act **emphasizes technical assistance to optimize existing flexibility** over new authority to grant waivers that are not otherwise possible. One of P3's lessons is the critical role of technical assistance in breaking down perceived policy barriers and clarifying how much leeway already exists within federal grants. The SDA Act creates a clear and legitimate pathway to collaborate across levels of government, including identifying where real statutory barriers do exist and how federal agencies might address them. It also avoids forcing agencies to quickly decide waiver requests based on limited information, especially for waivers with complex or unclear implications. Where a compelling need for new waiver authority or other statutory changes exists, the council is positioned to build a case...

...However, the SDA Act **fails to create a clear avenue to propose new waiver authorities or other statutory changes** —that may be identified as necessary to support states, tribes, and localities. As a starting point, the Act could create a stronger mechanism for the council to recommend statutory changes, including new waiver authority. As proposed, the annual report to Congress required by the Act must include "the major statutory, regulatory, and administrative challenges identified by State, local, and Tribal governments that received a grant...and the actions that Federal agencies are taking to address such challenges."^{xxiii} This provision could go further by instructing the council also to document where changes to statute—such as any proposed in the annual president's budget request—are recommended. Even where statutory changes can be proposed through other channels, these channels can sometimes be fragmented or make it difficult to understand how various proposals fit together. Explaining such proposals comprehensively in the council's report is a valuable way to make such a case in a transparent way that is accessible to stakeholders and to lay out ideas or proposals for waiver authority not contingent on annual appropriations processes. The legislation **recognizes the importance of linking data across agencies** in order to help coordinate services and track progress. A grantee's social determinants accelerator plan would need to include strategies for linking data across their partner agencies, necessitating the important and often complex efforts and alignment required to make data linking a reality...

...However, **it fails to provide resources to implement data linking work.** A critical finding from the IBM report on P3 is that data systems were not adequately funded to work across agency silos. The Mathematica report would later find that P3 grantees who planned to invest in their data systems failed to do so during the initial round of pilots due to this lack of support. Social determinants accelerator plans must include "the identification of the funding sources that would be used to finance the proposed interventions or approaches." xxiv Since the SDA Act does not directly fund implementation, sites could similarly struggle to secure the resources necessary to carry out data linkage plans.

The legislation **highlights the need for more support to grantees serving rural populations** by designating that at least 20 percent of the funding for such grantees. This provision proactively highlights the need for more evidence-based supports in rural communities across the country. For the first three cohorts of P3 pilots, federal agencies created separate categories of competition for both rural and tribal areas in acknowledgement of the diverse needs of different communities. Identifying rural areas as a priority in the legislation sends a clear message to the interagency council and to potential applicants about the importance of funding and supporting the particular needs of these communities.

Summary Chart

	Performance Partnership Pilots	Insights from Evaluators and Implementers	Social Determinants Accelerator Act	Forum's Verdict on SDA Act
Purpose	Test innovative, cost- effective, and outcome- focused strategies for improving results for disconnected youth.xxv	Agencies utilized leading practices for collaboration and pilot design, but had not fully identified funding and staff resources to sustain the pilots.xxvi	Help communities devise strategies to better leverage existing programs and authorities to improve the health and well-being of those participating in Medicaid.xxvii	Establishes clear funding and processes to support states and communities. It does not address implementation of strategies.
Funding for Planning	Not provided in statute. Federal agencies could provide based on availability of existing funds and political will.	Pilot sites needed greater support for planning and pilot design.	Provides significant funding for states, tribes, and localities to plan.	Sets up clear mechanisms that allows grantees to develop evidence-based plans and coordinate with partners at all levels of government.
Funding for Implementation	Not provided in statute. Federal agencies could provide based on availability of existing funds and political will.	Cohorts that received start-up funds were able to resource important needs such as coordination.	Fails to provide funding for key activities after planning such as data linkage.	Like P3 grantees, SDA Act grantees could similarly struggle to implement data linkages and other activities as expressed in their plans.
Centralized Support at the Federal Level	Statute did not mandate a centralized place of support such as an interagency council.	Federal agencies followed leading practices for interagency collaboration but needed greater central coordination and support to make P3 sustainable.	Mandates a federal interagency council to act as a centralized support system. Specifies that OMB facilitate timely resolution of cross-agency issues.	Builds on evaluations of P3 with a council with clear obligations, priorities, and resources.
Formal Mechanism to Integrate Non- Federal Views	No requirements for non- federal advisory or similar role in federal deliberative and decision process	Federal agencies opted to request public comment to obtain views on pilot solicitations and held webinars with Q&A. These optional mechanisms were nonetheless challenging given annual time frames to award pilots.	Authorizes GAO to appoint non-federal stakeholders to interagency council. Requires non-federal input on federal implementation guidance to agencies.	Will provide critical perspective to help federal agencies implement SDA Act effectively and better in keeping with on- the-ground realities.
Availability of Technical Assistance	Pilots received some TA from federal agencies and nonprofit partners when limited funding was available, but the statue did not provide a mandate or resources.	Pilots needed more support for successful implementation.	Emphasizes and funds technical assistance to optimize existing flexibility.	Clearly provides necessary supports to break down perceived policy barriers and clarify existing flexibilities.
Waiver Authority	Pilots can apply for waivers in a coordinated way across agencies and beyond what agencies could otherwise grant.	Pilots did not fully take advantage of their waiver authority.	Establishes clear mechanisms to understand and access existing waiver authority. Stops short of creating new waiver authority—or a clear path to propose such authority.	Provides for clear and direct communication about existing flexibilities and how to optimize them. Small tweaks, such as to the requirement for annual reports to Congress, could pave the way to introduce new flexibilities for states, tribes, and localities.
Data Linkage and Sharing	Pilot applicants explain their capacity and/or plans to collect, analyze, and use relevant data, including data sharing.	No pilots in the first cohort that were implementing plans for data linkage accomplished this task due to logistical and privacy concerns.	Recognizes the importance of linking data across agencies by explicitly providing funds and technical assistance for planning, but fails to provide support to implement plans.	Dedicated time, technical assistance, and financial resources for planning are critical to success. However, the P3 experience suggests that grantees could struggle to implement data plans without dedicated resources.
Support for Diverse Geographies	P3 supports the disconnected youth population which may exist in rural areas.	Statute did not address geography. However, federal agencies created priority considerations for rural and tribal populations.	Highlights the need for more support to grantees serving rural populations.	Prioritizes a key population in need of additional supports. The act could further prioritize tribal populations as well.
Protection for Vulnerable Populations	P3 requires agencies to ensure that pilots "will not otherwise adversely affect vulnerable populations that are the recipients of such services."	GAO identified where agencies acted to protect vulnerable populations as required. Federal FAQs on P3 elaborated on protections.	The SDA Act includes "Precautions for ensuring that vulnerable populations will not be denied access to Medicaid"	Provides important reassurance that the Act will not be misused to deny services to eligible, vulnerable populations.

Conclusion

Federal flexibility to empower better, more efficient results in people's lives remains a compelling charge. The rich learning from federal, state, local, and tribal efforts during P3 supports the SDA Act's more paced and deliberate approach to working across silos, serving communities, and measuring success. It also suggests how modest changes to the current legislation could help to yield greater impact.

New approaches, though badly needed, place significant demands on stakeholders that can be very difficult to support without funding for additional capacity. The SDA Act honors this demand by including funding for planning and technical assistance. The new interagency council creates important infrastructure to promote federal coordination and increased capacity to execute the goals of the legislation. The council will utilize the important expertise of staff throughout federal agencies needed for this type of work to succeed.

This important legislation could be further strengthened by contemplating next steps for grantees and federal agencies alike to push their work forward: follow-on funding to assist implementation, especially related to data linking, and mechanisms to recommend statutory changes and new waiver authority where a strong case exists. It takes tremendous prioritization and the choice not to pursue other worthy efforts for states, tribes, and localities to invest in formulating plans like these. It makes sense to avoid creating a cliff where implementing carefully crafted plans falls just out of reach due to resource constraints or the absence of a transparent path to potentially needed statutory flexibility.

Overall, SDA offers a new opportunity to test how far careful, funded planning and technical assistance can go in identifying better ways of serving people and determining where agencies need greater authority to provide new flexibility to across levels of government.

Endnotes

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